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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted to measure attitudes toward writing and toward methods of teaching writing to discover whether or not there were measurable differences between traditional college-aged students and older students and to consider what instructional implications such differences might have. Respondents included 137 students between 18 and 24 years of age and 45 students between 25 and 50 years of age. The two groups responded similarly to seven of the eleven areas covered by the instrument. Both groups indicated that they placed a high value on a college degree, both mildly agreed that they wrote well, most respondents believed that writing skills would prove useful to them, both groups did not consider their own experiences as adequate to write about, and both groups valued peer criticism. Differences between the groups were that older students indicated they spent more time outside of class revising work and preparing for class and they wanted more direction, guidance, or limitations concerning assignments. (MKM)

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Research on the Returning or Older Composition Student

by

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In recent years, a growing number of older students have begun or have returned to college. These include housewives, veterans, clerical workers, and professionals such as registered nurses, all of whom are seeking college credit and many of whom are seeking bachelor's degrees. Although there are a few special courses and programs for these students, most of them are mainstreamed at once into classes with students of traditional college age.[1] The growing number of returning or older students in freshman composition courses, in particular, raises questions about whether they should be taught in the same way as their younger classmates.

The experience on my own campus of an increasing number of such students is typical of colleges across the country. At Edgecliff, a former women's college where women still comprise about 80% and where students over 21 years of age comprise 25% of our student body, older students, particularly women, have been quite visible in recent years, especially because of an active organization they created to help "non-traditional students" (i.e. older, returning, married, handicapped, or special in other ways) with practical concerns such as study methods and babysitting services. Teaching these students in the midst of our students of traditional age and background, I began collecting my own impressions of them: they seem to be what the Victorians would have called earnest; they are dedicated, hard-working students (even when employed full-time); they look for guidance and direction, hesitating at times even more than traditional students to follow their own

insights and intuitions; at best they can bring a wealth of real-life experience and a richness of variety to the traditional classroom. But I questioned whether my impressions were accurate and, if so, what implications they had for teaching.

To test my observations, I devised a brief research instrument, a questionnaire on attitudes toward writing and toward methods of teaching writing, that could be administered to composition students on campus. In doing so, I had two objectives: (1) to discover whether or not there are measurable differences between students of traditional and those of non-traditional age and (2) to consider what pedagogical implications such differences might have, if any were discovered. I gave the questionnaire, which uses the Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) to 182 students in composition classes at Edgecliff College. I divided the students into two groups in order to compare their responses: Group A was made up of 137 students between 18 and 24 years of age and Group B was made up of 45 students between 25 and 50 years of age. The questionnaire and the responses are given at the end of the article.[2]

One factor that stands out in the results is the similarity of the two groups in seven of the eleven areas covered by the instrument, as indicated by the responses to questions 2,3,4,5,6,9, and 10. In response to #2, both groups indicate that they place a high value on a college degree, the younger students slightly more so than the older students. Responses to #3 are similar; 60% of the younger and 64% of the older students agree either mildly or strongly that they like to write and 7% of each group disagree strongly. In response to #4, a high number of both groups mildly agree that they write well, indicating that the level of confidence is similar in the two groups.

As #5 indicates, most students agree that it is important to have at least one writing course, with the older students tending to be just slightly stronger in their agreement. The two groups show a similar pattern of agreement with #6; they believe their writing skills will prove useful to them in the future.

The responses to #9 were somewhat surprising to me. One of the stereotyped views of older students I had was that they have plenty of experience to write about. Although I have confidence that they have something worthwhile to say, the students themselves indicate less confidence. The two groups again responded similarly, but considering the choices of mildly and strongly disagree together, older students appear slightly less confident that they know something worth writing about, and more older than younger students chose the "no opinion or don't know" response. The responses of both groups suggest the need to persuade students to look into their experiences with respect. An example of this need occurred in one of my freshman composition classes recently, when we were discussing what the students had written about Katherine Anne Porter's short story "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall." Many of the students, most of whom are of traditional college age, found it difficult to relate to an eighty year old, dying woman. The two registered nurses in the class had not volunteered any reflections, so I asked them for comments on death and on the story. Their responses were profound, and for a few moments, they seemed to bring Granny Weatherall into the room for the other students. But the nurses did not seem aware, without being asked, that they had anything special to offer.

With regard to #10, the two groups are also similar in the value they

place on peer criticism. Slightly more than half of each group sees some value in it; slightly less than half of each group is ignorant or skeptical of it.

Thus I found that in the value they place on a college degree and on writing courses, in their perceptions of themselves as writers, in the importance or lack of importance of their life experiences, and in their attitudes toward peer criticism, the age groups sampled show little difference.

The great difference between the groups emerges in the responses to questions 1,7,8, and 11. These are the only areas in which my impressions of differences were really validated, but they were strongly validated. In each question, there was a statistically significant difference between the responses of the two groups.

In response to #1, though most students agree, either mildly or strongly, that they put time and effort into their courses whether or not the subject appeals to them, students over 25 years of age were almost three times as likely to choose the first response, strongly agree. In other words, older students perceive themselves as working hard in all of their courses. Although effort alone does not guarantee results, it certainly is an important factor in the improvement of writing skills.

I was particularly interested in the responses to questions 7 and 8 because they are the most directly related to classroom practices. The responses suggest that most students, regardless of age, want some directions or limitations; most do not want complete freedom. But my impressions of non-traditional students had been that they are even more inclined than traditional students to ask, "What am I <u>supposed</u> to say? How am I <u>supposed</u> to say it? How long do <u>you</u> want it to be? What are you <u>looking for</u>?" The

statistics confirmed this impression; a statistically significant difference between the groups occurs in response to both questions.

Question 11 is the only one in which students were asked to give a quantitative response. My assumption in asking this question was that older students often appear to spend more time preparing for every class they take than younger students do; in a few cases it may even be too much time, leading to frustration and discouragement. Again, my suspicions are supported by the results; the difference between the responses of the two groups is statistically significant. Another way of summarizing the results other than that given below is that the average number of hours of preparation for each class put in by an older student is 2.9 hours, for a younger student 1.9 hours -- a difference of a full hour.

My research, therefore, implies three conclusions about the older or returning students tested:

(1) They are similar to students of traditional age in many of their attitudes toward writing and toward the teaching of composition.

(2) They differ from younger students in that they are likely to spend more time outside class revising essays and preparing for class.

(3) They are likely to manifest greater desire for direction, guidance, and limits on writing assignments than students of traditional college age.

Though I cannot verify that these points are true of all older or returning students, some common trends may be represented here.

A number of pedagogical applications are suggested to me by these results. They imply the need to recognize several practices that should be a part of the teaching of composition courses to older students:

(1) Being patient with non-traditional students' requests for directions while encouraging more automomy.

(2) Encouraging younger students to spend more time on out-of-class assignments, older students less if they seem to be overdoing it or becoming frustrated after many hours spent on assignments.

(3) Inviting both age groups, especially the non-traditional, to share and write about their work and life experiences, to build awareness of the material available to them.

(4) Recognizing that it is even more important to younger than to older students that the composition teacher use class time well, since younger students spend less time in preparation outside class.

(5) Encouraging students from the two age groups to work together in small group critiquing, so that the time commitment of the older students can be observed by the students of traditional age.

(6) Encouraging each group to read and critique work by members of the other age group, so the strengths of each group, particularly the improvements older students can accomplish through time spent on revision and editing, are mutually known.

I do not wish to see us create or exaggerate divisions between the two age groups, but I do wish to urge composition teachers to be ready to adapt their courses to meet the needs of the returning or older students who comprise an increasingly larger percentage of our composition courses.

QUESTIONNAIRE and RESPONSES

* 1. I put time and effort into my courses whether or not the subject appeals to me.

	STRONGLY AGREE 1.	MILDLY AGREE 2.	NO OPINION or DON'T KNOW 3.	MILDLY DISAGREE 4.	STRONGLY DISAGREE 5.
Group A. (18-24)	29.9%	52.6%	2.2%	13.1%	2.2%
Group B. (25-50)	73.3%	17.8%	4.4%	4.4%	0.0%

2. Having a college degree is important to me.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Group A. (18-24)	77.4	15.3	3.6	2.9	0.7
Group B. (25-50)	71.1	17.8	6.7	4.4	0.0

3. I would describe myself as a person who likes to write.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Group A. (18-24)	23.4	37.2	14.6	17.5	7.3
Group B. (25-50)	22.2	44.4	2.2	22.2	8.9

4. I would describe myself as a person who writes well.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Group A. (18-24)	10.9	42.3	22.6	19.0	5.1
Group B. (25-50)	20.0	37.8	17.8	17.8	6.7

5. I believe it is important to have at least one writing course in college.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Group A. (18-24)	68.6	21.9	3.6	4.4	1.5
Group B. (25-50)	71.1	20.0	6.7	0.0	2.2

6. I believe the writing skills I have acquired in my college courses will prove useful to me in the future.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Group A. (18-24)	58.4	26.3	7.3	2.2	5.8
Group B. (25-50)	57.8	26.7	8.9	4.4	2.2

Questionnaire and Responses, Cont'd

* 7. When I am given a writing assignment, I prefer to have complete freedom in what I write, with no directions or specifications.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Group A. (18-24)	12.4	31.4	9.5	38.0	8.8
Group B. (25-50)	8.9	17.8	6.7	37.8	28.9

* 8. I prefer to have directions or limitations when given a writing assignment.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Group A. (18-24)	13.9	51.1	13.1	15.3	6.6
Group B. (25-50)	35.6	42.2	6.7	8.9	6.7

9. I believe my own life experiences and interests give me plenty of material to write about.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Group A. (18-24)	41.6	38.0	9.5	10.2	0.7
Group B. (25-50)	35.6	37.8	17.8	8.9	0.0

10. I find peer criticism (other students) helpful in improving my writing.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
Group A. (18-24)	21.2	36.5	16.8	18.2	7.3
Group B. (25-50)	24.4	33.3	13.3	8.9	20.0

* 11. I would estimate the time I spend in preparation for each meeting of each class to be about:

	1 hr. or less	2 hrs.	3 hrs.	4 hrs.	5 hrs. or more
Group A. (18-24)	43.1	34.3	13.9	5.1	3.6
Group B. (25-50)	11.1	31.1	28.9	17.8	11.1

Age _____ Part or full time? _____

Classification (fresh., etc.) _____ Major _____

Traditional or non-trad. student? _____

* Indicates a statistically significant difference between the two groups.

NOTES

[1] A notable example of such special courses is Betty Renshaw's course at Prince George Community College, Largo, Maryland: First-Semester Composition for Returning Women Students. Her syllabus is available upon request.

[2] A brief report of this research was given at the CCCC in March, 1980, on a panel on Non-Traditional Students.